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Cosmopolitanism and Patriotism

Vazha Pshavela



Illustration by Florinda Pamungkas

Some people think that true patriotism excludes cosmopolitanism. This is a mistake. Every

true patriot is cosmopolitan and every genuine cosmopolitan is a patriot. Cosmopolitans serve their country and seek to uplift it intellectually, materially, and morally. They educate the best members of humanity and facilitate their society's well-being. If every human must be raised separately, so must every people be raised in its own way if humanity is to realize its full potential. Every human being ought to be aware of the sacredness of his or her national and individual identity. Likewise, every nation must honor and cultivate its unique traditions. When nations learn to respect their traditions, they will in their own separate ways increase the collective strength and beauty of the entire world.

Every patriot is honor-bound to serve his country with all his strength. His job is to think of the welfare of his fellow citizens. To the extent that his ideas are grounded in reality, his work will bear fruit on its native soil, and will benefit all of humanity. Thomas Edison is an American scientist, but the entire world enjoys the fruits of his inventions. Shakespeare is British through and through, but his writings sweeten the entire world to this day. Likewise, Goethe, Cervantes and other geniuses wrote for their people, but their works made them children of the entire earth.

Every genius is nourished by his native land. Geniuses are those who can be received by other nations like their native sons. A genius's homeland exceeds the bounds of his native ground; such a person belongs to the entire world. Nevertheless, a work of genius can find its most complete expression only on its native soil. *Hamlet* and *King Lear* will never sound as sweet as they do to the ears of an educated Englishman who reads the plays in his native language. Likewise, no matter how excellent the translation, Rustaveli's *Knight in the Panther's Skin* will never sound as sweet as it does when recited in the language in which it was written. Even if the reader understands Georgian as well as a native Georgian speaker, nuances will always be hidden from those who lack a native ear, who were not raised on the music of the poem's beauty. Insofar as they are human, geniuses have homelands that they love and cherish. But their works are destined to rise above such limits, because their writing belongs, like any works of scholarship or philosophy, to the world.

Science and genius show us the path to cosmopolitanism, but only with the help of patriotism and national feeling. If every nation became cognizant of its economic, political, and social situation, if the economic stratification that dominates the contemporary world were destroyed, nations would stop trying to conquer each other. The looting and wars that rule the earth would come to an end.

Patriotism depends on and derives its inspiration from life. Coeval with human existence, it contains within itself forces that no thinking person can negate: language, history, heroes, native soil, and a literary tradition.

From the second that a child sees his homeland, he seeks sustenance from it; he needs someone to look after him, milk and food to nourish him, and lullabies to give him peace. A child starts to love his native land in the space where he was born and raised, under his mother's guidance. Thus is patriotism born: the youth feels connected to those whose voices he becomes accustomed to, from whom he receives his first impressions. That is why he loves the language through which he came to know himself, and through which he learned to regard those who speak and sing in his language as his own people.

His village's obscure dialect, which is of little use to the rest of the world, is for him the crux of his being, the most precious element within his cultural inheritance, and the foundation of his self-consciousness. When he meets his fellow countryman in another part of the world, no matter whether he is a thief or another kind of criminal, his heart inevitably rejoices. Until a child begins to see more of the world, his soul is bound to the village into which he was born and where he passed his childhood.

It is impossible to imagine a sane person for whom one small part of the world does not mean more than all the other places in the universe combined. Why? Because no one can love ten thousand places at the same time. We are only born once, in a single and unrepeatable place, into a single family. A person who claims to love every nation to the same degree, and in the same way, is a liar. Either he is a hypocrite, or crazy, or he is barred from speaking the truth by the doctrines of his political party. Even an abandoned child, raised in an orphanage, who has hundreds of people to look after him, and who hears a thousand languages spoken around him, will, as he acquires self-consciousness, eventually chose only one language and regard only one country as his homeland.

Patriotism is more a matter of feeling than of intellect, although men of reason have always cherished their homeland. Cosmopolitanism is a matter merely of the brain; it bears no relation to the feelings that originate in the heart. Yet it is the core of the solution to the tragedy that haunts humanity today, for only through cosmopolitanism can we save the world from ethnic hatred and self-destruction.

We should understand cosmopolitanism in the following way: listen to the needs of your country, heed the wisdom of your people, dedicate yourself to their well-being, don't hate other nations and don't envy their happiness, don't prevent other nations from achieving their goals. Work towards the day when no one will subjugate your nation, and work for its progress until it equals the leading nations of the world. He who negates his country while he calls himself cosmopolitan is maimed by illusions. Even though he presents himself as a lover of the noblest feelings, such a person is unconsciously an enemy of humanity. May God protect us

from this pseudo-cosmopolitanism, which would require everyone to deny his place of birth. This kind of cosmopolitism means rejecting one’s very self. Every nation seeks freedom and the means to rule itself independently. The separate development of nations is the condition for the development of all humanity.

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translated from the Georgian by Rebecca Gould

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Read translator's note [+]

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Vazha Pshavela (literally, “son of the Pshav people,” or Vazha, as he is known in Georgian) is the pen name of Luka Razikashvili (1861-1915), a Georgian poet and writer best known for giving the Georgian folkloric tradition a modern literary form. Arguably the greatest 19th century Georgian poet, Vazha was a pioneer of the epic poem. His major works include the epic poems *Aluda Ketelauro* (1888), *Host and Guest* (1893), and *The Snake-eater* (1901), as well as dramas, short stories, and shorter verse forms. During the Soviet era, Vazha’s work was translated into Russian by major poets such as Osip Mandelstam, Boris Pasternak, Marina Tsvetaeva, and Nikolai Zabolotsky.

Rebecca Gould is the author of *Writers and Rebels: The Literatures of Insurgency in the Caucasus* (Yale University Press, 2016) and the translator of *After Tomorrow the Days Disappear: Ghazals and Other Poems of Hasan Sijzi of Delhi* (Northwestern University Press, 2016), and *The Prose of the Mountains: Tales of the Caucasus* (Central European University Press, 2015). Her translations from Georgian, Persian, and Russian have appeared in *The Hudson Review*, *Nimrod*, *The Atlanta Review*, *Prairie Schooner*, *Washington Square*, and *Tin House* (Open Bar). She teaches Comparative Literature and Translation Studies at the University of Bristol in the UK.

Natalia Bukia-Peters is a freelance translator, interpreter and teacher of Georgian and Russian. She studied at Tbilisi State Institute of Foreign languages before moving to New Zealand in 1992 and then to Cornwall in 1994. A member of the Chartered Institute of Linguists, she has translated many literary works from Georgian into English for the Ministry of Culture and Monument Protection of Georgia.

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